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Gen. Robt. E. Lee

COMMEMORATE ADDRESS before the
R. E. Lee Chapter Daughters of Confederacy,
Aberdeen, Mississippi, on the Anniversary of the
Great Commander's Birth, January 19, 1908

By E. L. SYKES

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ADDRESS

*Daughters of the Confederacy, Comrades, Ladies and
Gentlemen:—*

This is the day set apart by the Daughters of the Confederacy, as well as by Legislative enactment of the States of the South, as a Memorial Day—the natal day of the great military Chieftain who among all others was most conspicuous for his military achievements in that unfortunate struggle of our Southland, in which all was lost save honor. On this day, there are gathered together in all parts of this great American Union, the faithful followers of the Lost Cause, who stand with bowed heads in prayer, or raise their voices in songs of patriotic memories, or in spoken words of eulogy, for our dead Chieftain. To us this is not a day of sorrow; we meet, not to grieve, but to glorify,—we meet for new inspiration from the deeds that have made the name of Robert E. Lee one of undying fame.

An eminent Southern writer has said: “A land without memories is a land without liberties,” and this is true; for no country has established a proper national existence except through long gradations of light and darkness, of debasement and exaltation, through which its people have struggled, and in which the events of the past, illuminate the progress of the future, pictured by traditions that keep alive the longings of national honor, and serve as an incentive to patriotism.

It has ever been, “since man was made to mourn,” that the high roads of human progress have been macadamized with human bones, and sprinkled with human blood.

*Source unknown
1921*

Truths which come in pain and sorrow to individuals, come in war and revolutions to nations. No great thought has been given to the world, but that great brows have ached for it. All great truths have been attested by the sufferings of martyrs; and great principles for the betterment of the world, have been purchased with the lives of men. Through the groans of martyrs, the blood of heroes, and the labors of weary years, the enlightening principles that were to bless humanity were "wrought out of wrath by the swords of mankind." The epochs of these great events live for the world in history, and for a people alive with national honor, both in history, and traditions, by a commemoration of its important periods by such festivals as constitute a great patriotic sacrament.

In these evolutions of nations, there have been individuals whose higher qualifications, greater individuality, and greater powers, physical and mental, have fated them to be the important factors in working out the destiny of their country, insomuch that the threads of their lives are so interwoven with the great epochs in which they took their places, that the traditions of the one go hand-in-hand with those of the other, and give them a special commemoration which in one age amounted to deification, and in another, to veneration; for in many particulars, the religion of one age becomes the poetry of the next.

Looking backward along the dim vistas of the past, we find that from the earliest ages of the world, by rites either heathen or Christian, there has been some method of apotheosis to mortals who have accomplished their work in this world in a pre-eminent manner. Valor has given demigods to mythology, and piety, canonization in church traditions.

These were but the prototypes of that distinct veneration which more enlightened and less superstitious ages give to those whose actions have placed them above the endeavors of more ordinary men. This veneration may be ephemeral or perpetual. The mere glamour of military

achievement may dazzle for a while; the adroitness of brilliant statesmanship, or the charm of fervid oratory, may create a passing popular idol; the fanaticism of sectarian zeal may for a time adorn the mortal head with an evanescent, saintly halo; many reputations glitter for a time with the superficial gilding with which contemporaneous partisanship may adorn them; but the relentless pen of the historian of an age following that in which fervor and excitement warped the judgment of admirers and paralyzed true opinion, overthrows many an idol and levels many a spurious demigod to the common plane of faulty and erring humanity. A Marlborough, despite the fame that the most brilliant victories that military genius could achieve had been awarded him, and the efforts of the greatest masters of English versification to render him immortal, is found at last to be venal, avaricious and treacherous; a Cromwell, dissembling and hypocritical; a Knox, more bigot than saint; a Napoleon, selfish, false and unprincipled; and even the pious Milton, somewhat tainted with graft. In fact, we may walk through the vast halls of the Pantheon of history and find among all the heroic figures that adorn it, but few that can command an undivided and complete veneration, if we make true greatness the object of it.

There are a few illustrious men whose deeds and conduct, simply told, show a greatness that goes sounding down through the ages without the adornment of the adulation of venal bards or partizan panegyrists, and whom the bare facts of history, whether they have failed or whether they have triumphed, will immortalize, despite the assaults of time-serving detraction, however adroit or able may be the speciousness by which it is aided. Such a one is he whose birthday we now commemorate.

“But I sing of one whose glory shone
Like a meteor bright and grand;
Who gave his name to the tramp of fame
And his sword to a generous land.”

There are mighty ones who have worn the victor's crown, whose success, stained with earthly taints, has left the robe of truth whitest where it was least touched by it; but he was one who in the grandeur of a pure heroic life,—“where all was done that man could do, and all was done in vain”—gave to God his frustrate endeavor, untarnished, and, bowing to the will of the Maker, left to the world, unchallenged, its share in man's crime; for never a juster cause fell and never a nobler champion upheld it.

While we of the South grant that the sword, the last stern arbiter of earthly difference, has settled the dispute, we know that those who bore the “Southern Cross” during those days of woe and blood under the leadership of that consummate Captain, resolute, devoted, and daring, no matter which way rolled the tide of war to which they opposed their gallant breasts; by their deeds have attested the truth of their hearts, and there is no question with us of the right of their cause. There was no question of it with Lee, although there was no one who more deeply deplored the factional differences that led to an open rupture between the North and the South.

He had given close thought and study to the grave question, whether the compact between the States reserved to any one of them the right to withdraw from the federation of States if it saw proper to do so, and in his concluding analysis of the facts that confronted him, he was convinced that the United States, in coercing Virginia, called upon him to wage an unjust war upon his State, his countrymen, and kinsmen. Lee was a soldier,—not a politician, and had nothing to do with the acrimonious discussions that culminated in war. When his State was in conflict with the Federal Government, he saw which way his duty led, and without hesitation he cast his lot with her.

Some partizan writers have sneered at his turning his sword upon the government that gave him his military education. When King Edward of England reproved a

gallant Knight-Templar, whom he had captured, fighting in the Scottish ranks, for using his sword, consecrated to the defense of Christendom, against a Christian nation, the Knight's reply was: "I was a Scotchman before I was a Templar." And so with Lee—he was a Virginian before he was a West Pointer. His loyalty to his sacred trust, his valor and skill in executing it, his moderation in victory, his constancy and fortitude in defeat, his grand equipoise of character, place him far beyond the voice of puny detraction, which has not now even an echo, while friend and foe, the old world and the new, wreath his memory with garlands of laurel, and freely render their tribute to the purest hero of the war.

Descended from a long line of illustrious ancestors famous in the history of the old world and the new; titled ones who rode at the bridle hand of Plantagenet, princes as crusaders in Palestine, and valiant men-at-arms at Cressy and Poitiers, always bearing their escutcheon unsullied throughout the trying times that made the great epochs of English history; and of the untitled but famous gentry who are noted in the history of the colonies and the events of the Revolution; he excels them all as the Knight of Nature's own creation for whom the accolade of chivalry, the pride and pomp of caste, and station, can add nothing to the glory of one who had acquired through habitual self-restraint, the mastery of all the defects of an earthly nature, and has maintained a fixed and unswerving allegiance to duty for duty's sake.

With an eye fixed on duty alone, and a heart in which no sordid influences could find lodgment, he did not need and he did not seek other counsel than the dictates of his own conscience, unwarping by the passions and prejudices that usually beset the career of most men, and thus, in a certain sense, he walked alone, the most striking, impressive type of exalted humanity; his stately, commanding figure, his perfect expression of manly beauty and modesty, and the grace, ease, and courtesy of a born patrician,

giving him a physique in complete harmony with his lofty attributes.

So when the shrill, clanging curtain of war was raised, and the loud orchestra of artillery thundered forth its deadly notes, and the shuddering nations looked upon the grandest drama that had been enacted in modern days, no actor trod the boards of that gloomy stage who enchained the attention more completely than Lee. No one of that brilliant galaxy of military chieftains—

“Inspired repulsed battalions to engage,
Or taught the doubtful battle where to wage.”

From the beginning to the end, he was actuated by no personal consideration. There were others who hesitated where to place their fortunes, and were swayed by the promises of important positions. The greatest of Federal Admirals and the soldier who has been called “The Rock of Chickamauga,” despite their high renown, are not above suspicion, but the taunting query—“Under which King, Bezonian, speak or die?” could not be put to Lee. With flattering offers from the Federal side, and with no certainty of the place that would be given him by the Confederacy, careless of all such considerations, he promptly followed where duty and honor beckoned to him.

I may not rehearse, on this occasion, the various military achievements that have placed him beside the greatest masters of the art of war. The best military critics of the old world have given them an elaborate review, with a delineation more powerful than I can attempt, and the songs of the poet and the imagery of romance have portrayed them in language more glowing than I am capable of. After the bloody and fruitless battle of Seven Pines, when Lee was placed in charge of the army of Virginia, the world soon saw that a master hand wielded the truncheon of command that could only be matched by that of a Marlborough, a Napoleon or a Wellington.

In the three years in which he fought his great battles,

with tremendous odds against him, and foiled the best strategist that the Union army could boast, his wonderful forecast that anticipated the movements of the enemy, and the mathematical precision with which he met them, challenged the admiration of the world, and made him the hero so beloved of victory, that she left him only when his ranks were reduced to a skirmish line, his last gun had thundered its defiance, and his worn and thinned legions, fronting to the very last a tremendously outnumbered foe, "sank outwearied rather than o'ercome." The shattered blade, the dismounted gun and the hecatombs of slaughtered foes taught blatant demigogues that Southern chivalry was not a myth; and, side by side, in the annals of history with the white plume of Navarre, the crests of Edward and Bayard, we have our Lee; and in the devoted ones who followed him, a band as effulgent in glory as the Knight's of Arthur's Round Table who fell at Lyonness around their King, or the paladins of Charlemagne who sank before the overwhelming myriads of Moorish lances in the fatal Pass of Roncesvalles.

During the trying period in which he led the hosts of the Confederacy, there was much of jealousy, much of envy, much of heart burning, much of shifting the blame for failure or disaster; but Lee passed unscathed through it all. Unswerving from the high duties that devolved upon him, and faithful to the honest, unbiased service which he conceived his country demanded, prejudice was a stranger to him, and men of worth, whether friendly or unfriendly to him, received all proper commendation.

He measured all by their usefulness to the country. He shrank from no blame, freely shared the honors of success with those who deserved them, and as freely assumed his full share of the responsibility for defeat or disaster. There were gallant and efficient officers who, whatever might have been their abilities, have displayed characteristics that have held them up to censure. There has been none of this for Lee.

Of all the valiant Knights of the "Round Table," tradition tells us that Sir Galahad, alone, possessed sufficient purity of heart to successfully accomplish the quest of the "Holy Grail;" so, for the whiteness of his soul, Lee is the one hero of the war who has accomplished his mission with unalloyed and unstinted commendation from all sources.

In the thirteen decades of American independence, there has been a long list of heroes, statesmen, jurists, and soldiers, from North, South, East and West, who have given a lustre to our country's glory, and have gained much of the world's admiration; but the highest meed of the world's veneration belongs to two of them, both Southern men—George Washington and Robert E. Lee, who equalled him in patriotism and in other high characteristics, and who perhaps, excelled him in military ability. In fact, there was much resemblance between them. Both were orderly, systematic, and regular; both exhibited the rarest virtues of self-restraint and self-command, and both were of such exalted character that men held them in such reverence that we hear but little of the commonplace things of life about them; and particularly of Lee, we hear but few things he did or said, outside of his public life. There was a natural, reticent dignity about him that precluded much overflow of feeling, although he was of an affectionate and social nature, and of devout and zealous religious convictions and unassuming piety.

No man had such a place as Lee held in the hearts of the soldiers, from the highest officer to the humblest private in the ranks. It was not the wild, fantastic devotion of Frenchmen to Napoleon, set ablaze by the meteor of conquest. It was the love and faith of patriots for the serene, calm, resourceful hero, who, above all sordid feelings, served his country, not his ambition; who planned for both their glory and safety; who was of them and with them; sharing alike their victories, disasters, and privations; and when the cause had fallen, was still of them and

with them until his dying day, and could say, as the stainless Percy said, when with his dying breath, as he lay upon the field of Hedgely Moor, he expressed his loyalty to the Red Rose of Lancaster—"I have kept well the bird in my bosom." Refusing offers of lucrative positions in important enterprises to which the mere association of his name was all-important, and the gifts of an honored home and an easy living at the hands of wealthy and titled admirers in England—wrapping himself in the mantle of his spotless integrity, and retiring into virtuous poverty, he chose the quiet retreat of Lexington and the duty of guiding in the fields of learning the youths whose sires he had led in the rugged highways of war.

Within the walls of the stately cathedral of Canterbury, there is a tomb that contains the ashes of the noblest and the purest of the Princes of the Plantagenet Line. Upon it rests his recumbent effigy in the panoply of a Knight and Prince. There is shown his shield and surcoat, and his "helm that never bowed to aught but time." Wherever the English language is spoken, his virtue, his valor, and his loftiness of character shine brightly through the gloom of centuries, and his name is the synonym of heroism and chivalry. The mightiest Prince of his day, although sprung from a line of glorious, royal ancestors, he did not disdain to bear the humble motto, "Ich dein"—"I serve."

Within the college chapel at Lexington, there is a tomb, strikingly suggestive of Medieval solemnity, upon which reposes the effigy of an uncrowned Prince of the new world who always bore upon his heart the precept of the Divine Master—"He that is greatest among you shall be your servant;" and who sought by true service, unalloyed by love of self, to do honestly, fearlessly, thoroughly, and conscientiously the work entrusted to him and ultimately to find that

"The toppling crags of duty scaled
Are close upon the shining Table-Lands
To which our God, Himself, is moon and sun,"
and an abiding shrine in the hearts of his countrymen.

In celebrating this anniversary, we erect a grander monument than any lofty abbey that hides within its stately and solemn gloom the ashes of the royal and mighty ones who have passed from the scenes of earthly pride and pomp. We grope not in the realms of mortality, where the flickering torch of tradition reveals with dim light the ashes of glory adorned by the cold, carved garlands of the passionless artisan, but we perpetuate a living, glowing memory, as year by year we assemble and recall the life and deeds of the greatest leader of the Southern hosts, who gave to a fallen cause so much of the glory and honor we did not lose, in losing everything else. Nor could there be a more befitting assembly for this celebration than "The Daughters of the Confederacy." For in those days of sacrifice, the mingled libation on the altars of our country, was the blood of brave men and the tears of true women; and wherever a gallant, manly form was shorn of life, a gentle woman's heart was bereft of happiness. Where valor, endurance, and intrepidity strode along the perilous edge of battle, constancy, devotion, and womanly fortitude abode at home, rendering in their sphere a service commensurate with deeds of heroes.

In all the varying scenes of Civil War, whether as a Ministering Spirit to the sick and wounded, that crowded the military hospitals, or as a medium through which our soldiery could be supplied with clothing, or cheered in the performance of duty, our dear women were angels of love and mercy.

 "Upon her country's altar,
 Laying all she loved and prized,
 Ah! Who shall tell the pain,
 With which she viewed that country's bloody fall
 And realized her sacrifice was vain."

When at last our hopes were gone, "When darkness was the darkest," and when a ruined people sat down upon the wreck of their hopes, the women of our Southland, hold-

ing in reverence the valor and heroism of our soldiery, conceived the idea of erecting monuments to our dead; and to-day in many of our cities and villages there stands a marble shaft to recount the bravery of our Southern heroes, and as an enduring monument to the love and affection of the Daughters of the Confederacy—

“Yon marble minstrel’s voiceless stone,
In deathless song shall tell
When many a vanquished age has flown,
The story, how ye fell;
Nor wreck, nor change, nor winter’s blight,
Nor time’s remorseless doom,
Shall dim one ray of glory’s light,
That gilds yon deathless tomb.”

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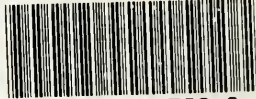
“On Fame’s eternal Camping Ground
Their silent tents are spread
And Glory guards with solemn round
The bivouac of the dead.”

Her work has not ceased with the memories of the heroic dead. Upon the living heroes, all the glory of that immortal struggle is being perpetuated in the distribution of the Cross of Honor, a decoration more honorable than the “Star or Garter, when worthily worn.” These are the jewels the Daughters of the Confederacy bestow on annual occasions like this, upon worthy survivors to whom it is given strictly in charge to keep in remembrance of the glory and renown of Southern chivalry in that immortal struggle.

Material monuments crumble and decay, and time erases from earth, the last resting places of both the lofty and the lowly dead; but the shrines of memory, through succeeding ages, preserves the names and deeds of those who have deserved the reverence of posterity. And this, the natal day of Robert E. Lee,—as great a leader as ever bore

the baton of command, as true and grand a man as was ever created in the likeness of his Maker—will be celebrated; and his deeds will be remembered while there are, as there ever will be, men to whom have descended the valor and patriotism of a soldier race, or women who inherit the virtues of the Daughters of the Confederacy.

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